

INFINITI
**THE REDESIGNED
INFINITI Q70L**
See the Q70L in the "For Those With Drive" film series

[» WATCH THE FILMS](#)

THE **ROOT**

99 NEW STORIES

NEWSLETTER

Home | History

This Egyptian Paddle Doll May Look Like a Simple Toy, but It Is So Much More

Image of the Week: Archaeologists believe the dolls, which lay bare the influence of Nubian culture, may be symbolic of a sacred funereal ritual.

BY: IMAGE OF THE BLACK ARCHIVE & LIBRARY

Posted: Oct. 7 2014 3:00 AM

17

11





Egyptian, Paddle doll, XI dynasty (circa 2040-2000 B.C.). Wood, pigment, clay beads, 19.1 cm high.
THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

T

his image is part of a weekly series that **The Root** is presenting in conjunction with the **Image of the Black Archive & Library** at Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African and African American Research.

Lacking the austere grandeur usually associated with the art of ancient Egypt, the truncated body and staring eyes of this simple female form may seem enigmatic.

Within its deceptively simple arrangement of form and color, however, is distilled the rich, complex fusion of cultures that determined one of the crucial turning points in the history of this fascinating civilization. Not for the first time, the identity of Egypt and its people was crucially enriched by the expressive traditions of the great black kingdom of Nubia to the south.

Cut from a thin, flat piece of wood, the figure is reduced to a rather elegant elongated form. This particular shape and the toylike aspect of the object have lent such objects the imprecise term of “paddle dolls.” The legs and hands are purposely eliminated. Around the neck a band of cloth has been wound, painted black with two white beads attached for eyes.

One of the most distinctive features of this figure, and hundreds more of the same type, is the elaborate hairdo. It is made of dried mud beads threaded onto fiber strands and recalls the braided style of some sub-Saharan peoples.

The figure wears a long, formfitting dress suspended by straps from the shoulders. It is decorated with simple geometric patterns arranged in sequential patterns of red, black and brown. Below the dress, the prominent pubic region is exposed, a feature of great importance for the significance of the figure.

Now a common feature in collections of Egyptian art around the world, these objects were made to accompany their owners to the obscurity of the grave. Most examples have been discovered in a single area within the Valley of the Kings, the spectacular burial site of some of Egypt’s most prominent pharaohs. This vast zone is located on the west bank of the Nile, opposite the great metropolis of Thebes. The dolls are specifically associated with the expansive mortuary temple complex of **Mentuhotep II**, the ruler who reunified the regions of Upper and Lower Egypt around 2040 B.C. after a long period of internal strife and division.

Personally known as Nebhepetre, Mentuhotep began a new era of consolidation and territorial expansion that lasted throughout his half-century reign. He restored order to Egypt by reinventing the notion of pharaonic rule far from the traditional centers of authority to the north. He centered the religious and political power of his realm at Thebes, located in the rising territory of Upper Egypt not far from his powerful southern neighbor Nubia. As will be seen, the history of Egypt and black Africa would be closely intertwined from this point on.

The reductively fashioned paddle dolls project a primal existential quality and have long resisted interpretation. At first they were merely considered to be the treasured playthings of little girls accompanying their owners to the grave. Alternately, their role as symbolic means of adult sexual gratification in the afterlife was proposed.

The disposition of these finds within the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep and other royal funerary sites, however, clearly argues against either of these proposed functions. Often they have been found in large groups within the graves of women, giving the impression of figures involved in some common activity. Within the same context, miniature reproductions of musical instruments, such as harps and ivory clappers, have also been discovered, as well as papyrus texts containing powerful spells to facilitate the revival of the soul.

The archaeological record therefore strongly suggests a highly specific purpose for these modest figures. Recently, Egyptologists have convincingly argued for their association with key ritual ceremonies performed at Mentuhotep's mortuary temple. According to this insight, the paddle dolls serve as schematic representations of actual sacred dancers who performed in groups known as *khener*.

The divine dance served the vital function of maintaining the soul of the pharaoh, deified as the earthly incarnation of the sun god Re. The facilitating agency of his resurrection and existence beyond death was the beneficent cow-horned goddess Hathor. Also associated with the divine family of Re, Hathor had prevented her father from expiring by dancing naked before him. His spontaneous response of laughter to her seemingly inappropriate act revived him, thus saving the world itself from destruction.

Known in ancient culture by the Greek term *anasyrma*, or "skirt raising," the gesture actually served an apotropaic function of averting disaster. The exposed pubic regions of the dolls may allude to Hathor's saving act before her father, to be ritually perpetuated in the temple dance. The paddle dolls were apparently intended to accompany their owners to the grave in order to perform this same life-sustaining ritual throughout eternity.

As it turns out, the reference of these exotic paddle dolls to courtly ceremony also sheds light on the contemporary cultural and political dynamics between Egypt and Nubia, a large arid expanse lying beyond the hinterland of Egypt's southern border. Its people were dark-skinned Africans who possessed a mighty kingdom of their own, known as Kerma. For centuries the two powers had shared an uneasy relationship, regarding each other by turns as a military threat and lucrative trading partner.

SEE ALSO

The Story You Don't Know About the End of Apartheid

Honoring the African Slaves of Peru With a Dance

Stephen King, Courtney B. Vance and Gloria Reuben Featured in Tuesday's Season Premiere of *Finding Your Roots With Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*

Did Lincoln Want to Ship Black People Back to Africa?

Courtney B. Vance Discovers a Rebellious Slave in His Family Tree

Judging from the evidence of the paddle dolls, the cult ritual of Hathor's dance at Thebes bore the strong imprint of Nubian dress and bodily adornment and could also have featured distinctive forms of music and dance brought by the performers from their homeland to the south. The cloth patterns worn by the paddle dolls, like the diamond configured tattoos of three women buried within Mentuhotep's temple complex, are not Egyptian in origin but resemble those found on Nubian pottery of the period. Fertility figures unearthed at the Nubian site of Toshka and elsewhere are also similar in form and decoration to the paddle figures.

Some of the women who re-enacted Hathor's dance may themselves have been of Nubian origin, an identity directly evoked by the dark faces and body decoration of the paddle dolls. In fact, Kemsit, one of Mentuhotep's secondary wives and a priestess of Hathor, may herself have been Nubian. She was buried with five other women beneath the terrace of his mortuary temple, perhaps sacrificed to perpetually serve his funerary cult.

The discovery of the paddle dolls at Thebes provides yet another tantalizing glimpse of the many-faceted impact of this vast region on Egyptian art and culture. The arrival of the mesmerizing *khener* performers in the service of Mentuhotep II coincides with a shift in the balance of power between dynastic Egypt and Nubia. The encroachment upon Nubia's territorial extent during the Middle Kingdom was significantly offset by inroads made by its elite through intermarriage with the highest levels of Egyptian society. In the end, this subtle form of cultural osmosis proved the more lasting in the struggle between these great powers.

The [Image of the Black Archive & Library](#) resides at Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African and African American Research. The founding director of the Hutchins Center is Henry Louis Gates Jr., who is also The Root's editor-in-chief. The archive and Harvard University Press collaborated to create [The Image of the Black in Western Art](#) book series, eight volumes of which were edited by Gates and David Bindman and published by Harvard University Press. Text for each Image of the Week is written by Sheldon Cheek.

Like [The Root on Facebook](#). Follow us on [Twitter](#).

WE RECOMMEND

Raven-Symoné Goes 'New Black,' Doesn't Want to Be Labeled African American
(The Root)

MORE FROM OUR PARTNERS

Not Having One Of These Credit Cards in 2014 Will Be A Mistake
(NextAdvisor Daily)

7 Creative Ways to Find Cash for College
(The Root)

Which Black Man Was Responsible for
Burying Bodies at Gettysburg?
(The Root)

Remembering the Gifts of Geoffrey
Holder
(The Root)

Jacksonville Jaguars Apologize for
Mascot's Ebola 'Joke'
(The Root)

I Refuse to Let 'Daddy Issues' Hold Me
Back
(The Root)

The Merit-Based Lender With a Different
Approach to Personal Lending and
Credit
(TechCrunch)

Shocking Last Name Meanings and
Origins
(Ancestry.com)

Best 6 Credit Cards with No Interest to
Help You Get out of Debt
(NextAdvisor Daily)

Oprah's Palace In The Bahamas Will
Leave You In Awe
(Lonny Magazine)

HIV Positive: The Toughest Countries in
the World to Live in
(TheBody.com)

Recommended by

COMMENTS

Commenting Policy

Sign in

livefyre 

		+ Follow	Post comment as...

Newest | Oldest

